

Emissary of the Void, Part I

By Greg Keyes; Illustration by Mike Huddleston.

Well, that's interesting, Uldir Lockett thought, as a pair of feminine legs in black tights came hurtling over his left shoulder. Above the tights he was vaguely aware of a dark yellow skirt and, even farther up, a young, determined face framed in short dark hair. But it was the feet that held his attention as they hit square in the center of the table at which he and his companions sat, shocking their drinks into brief suborbits. Then the feet were gone, propelling legs, yellow skirt, and all an estimated two meters up and one out toward the balcony above them. Searing flashes of weapon fire hissed by, and Uldir found his hand groping at an empty holster.

"Stop her!" Someone behind Uldir shouted.

Two of his three companions, Uldir saw, were also reaching for weapons that weren't there. The third, a human woman with startling platinum hair, brushed a fleck of Corellian whisky from the long scar beneath her left eye.

"I need a new drink," she noted, as another volley of yellow streamers seared by, striking the synthewood balcony the girl had managed to grab. The patrons of the In the Red cantina were diving away from the newly declared war-zone, but the music from the band continued to blare cheerfully over the sound of weapon fire.

"I hate locals," Leaft growled, thumping the curled fist of his foot on the table and scowling as only a Dug can scowl.

A glance over his shoulder confirmed what Uldir already suspected: The girl's pursuers were Corporate Sector Authority law enforcement, the only people on Bonadan allowed to carry weapons. From the color and intensity of their beams, he figured they were using a stun setting, and in any event their target was definitely the girl, who was now significantly above them, putting Uldir and his companions well out of the line of fire. He relaxed a little, settling his amber gaze on the girl as she heaved herself up, wondering what she had done to provoke such a strong reaction from the local constabulary.

"Very impolite," Vook said, apparently agreeing with the Dug. His flat, noseless Duro face was unreadable, but his tone, as usual, was melancholy, as if even this put him in mind of his lost homeworld.

"I hate vacations," Leaft said, thumping the table again.

It wasn't exactly a vacation. A close scrape with a Yuuzhan Vong interdicator on the Hydian Way had left the transport the unlikely quartet shared with a sputtering hyperdrive and no shields at all. They had managed to limp to the Corporate Sector, a rimward territory still essentially neutral in the conflict between what remained of the free New Republic and the fierce extragalactic Yuuzhan Vong, who were gobbling it up system by system in their religious crusade of conquest. Left with nothing to do while repairs were effected, Uldir figured they could all use a little time off, and consequently the four soon found themselves on the galasol strip, a colorful collection of overpriced cantinas and casinos near the spaceport.

The fleeing girl was dressed like the attendants Uldir had seen earlier that evening at the Blue-Shift Luck casino, but if she was really a game-girl, she was a nimble one. As he watched, she flipped over the balcony, twisting deftly between the several lines of fire directed at her, and crouched behind a now abandoned table. The CSA lawmen clustered below the balcony, firing up.

"That's probably a mistake," remarked Vega Sepen, the platinum-crowned woman.

"Tactically unsound," Vook agreed, gravely.

"One unarmed short human against four corp-clowns," Leaft sneered. "Not worth the price of admission."

"She's not that short," Uldir corrected, crossing his arms and lifting the square tip of his chin toward the balcony. "She's a girl."

"Uh, oh," Vega murmured.

"Don't discuss human gender," the Dug growled. "The whole idea sickens me. Urr . . . *Captain*." He added that last a little sullenly, probably remembering one of the many formal reprimands he'd gotten lately from superiors.

About that time, the table the girl was hiding behind suddenly came over the balcony rail. It hit three of the security men squarely and nicked the fourth. With a fierce grin, the girl turned and ran off across the upper level toward an exit.

"She's getting away," Vook noticed.

"Yeah," Uldir said. "Maybe not."

Vega must have seen the expression on Uldir's face.

"Not our fight," she cautioned. "We're rescue fliers, not bounty hunters."

"Well, we can't fly without a ship, and I'm bored," Uldir said. "Anyway, she owes me for these drinks." With that, he pushed back his chair, closed up his flight jacket, and leaped onto the table.

"This won't turn out well," he heard Vook mournfully predict.

Uldir followed the girl's example, launching himself from the table. He caught the balcony, swiftly pulled himself up and over and ran toward the exit through which she had vanished.

The exit led to an upper story, open-air courtyard. There, beneath a rusty evening sky, he found a trail of angry and confused patrons cursing after his quarry as she clambered up the output cable of the ion shield that filtered Bonadan's polluted air into something approaching pleasant. Uldir's opinion of the young woman's athletic prowess rose another notch, offset by the growing suspicion that she was probably some sort of burglar or spy. Maybe she had stolen something from the casino, or had been attempting to. Whatever it was, he was determined to find out.

He skipped to his right to avoid tripping over a fallen Rodian, but that brought him face-to-face with an immense Barabel male gnashing a set of very sharp teeth some half a meter above his own meter-and-a-half frame.

"Sorry," Uldir grunted at the scaled tower.

The Barabel's black reptilian face contorted. "You insult me?" He flexed his claws, and it occurred to Uldir that the Bonadan police couldn't confiscate natural weapons.

The Barabel had teeth, claws, and sixty kilos on him. Uldir had his fists and the best unarmed combat training the Search and Rescue Corps could provide.

So he ran, dodging behind a stumbling-drunk Togorian as the Barabel took a swipe at him. The big lizard tried to correct for Uldir's sudden movement and instead hit the white-furred humanoid, who yowled and lurched to face her antagonist. Uldir thought he wouldn't mind seeing how that turned out, under ordinary circumstances, but once again he'd lost sight of the thief.

He went up the cable hand-over-hand, pulling himself onto the rooftop. From here he couldn't see the galasol strip, but he could hear it in a blare of music -- Uldir and his companions had arrived during a sort of local festival thrown by one of the new execs of the corporate sector. They'd had to push their way through a parade dominated by floaters bearing likenesses of the various leaders of the CSA, distributing free gambling chits for adults and trinkets for the kids. His vantage now overlooked the uglier side of Bonadan, the warehouse district that lay behind the flashy facade of the strip.

"How in the . . . ?" Uldir began, then realized he was talking to himself, something he considered a bad sign. But how had she made that jump? It was four meters to the air lane the barges traveled in if it was a centimeter.

She was running toward the next barge up, which was separated from its companion by only a meter or so, and the line of barges went on as far as the eye could see.

"Carbon flush," he swore. If he could not make the jump, he'd lost her, but it sure wasn't worth seeing if he could make the jump, so that was that.

He heard a hiss behind him and turned to see the Barabel coming up fast and decided it was worth finding out after all. He took ten paces and leaped with all of his might. At the last instant, he had the sudden sinking feeling he wouldn't make it, followed swiftly by the sinking feeling of gravity having a joke on him. He'd jumped long enough, but not high enough. He wouldn't even scrape the side of the barge going down.

He almost didn't see the multi-sensor cable dangling in front of him, but at the last instant he did, and he wrapped his hands around it, wincing at the friction burn he produced killing his momentum. Swearing a silent thanks to whatever fates protected fools and starpilots, he started pulling himself up, ignoring the sibilant string of unintelligible curses the Barabel was howling after him.

On top, he took a moment to catch his breath, and for an instant he stood awestruck by the evening. Bonadan's primary was a giant red egg yolk smeared against a stark ebony horizon of eroding hills and slag heaps. In the melting glare of that light, the plexisteel towers of the spaceport appeared to be molded of living lava. Plumes of black smoke drifted up from distant refineries, pancaking into clouds made luminous by the dying light of the sun, stretching shadow fingers toward the horizon of night. In the deep of the sky the actinic flares of ion drives winked here and there as ships arrived and departed. The ore train he stood on stretched far away, like some sort of magical path above the barren landscape.

There was nothing admirable about the ecological mess the Corporate Sector Authority had made of a once-lush planet, but there was beauty in everything, even devastation. The Force was present even in a wasteland.

The barges were strictly planetary, their interiors open to the air. He didn't recognize the ore -- he hoped it wasn't radioactive -- but it certainly made for bad footing, so as he started after the girl, he ran along the raised metal lip of the barge. The narrowness of it didn't bother him -- as a boy the spaceports on Coruscant and pretty much everywhere else in the galaxy had been his playgrounds, and he'd spent many an hour doing far more foolish things on far more precarious surfaces.

To his satisfaction, his quarry didn't seem to have noticed him yet. She was taking her time, certain she'd lost her pursuers. He jumped the meter to the next barge, and then the next, closing all the while, confident that the steady hum of repulsorlifts would mask his approach. Besides, the girl had stopped now, lifting up her dress to reveal something taped to her leg. She began working at the adhesive, tearing it off in strips.

Ah-hah, he thought. Now we'll see what you've stolen.

When he came within five meters, however, the girl stopped what she was doing and spun on her heels to face him.

"Stay there!" she shouted over the thrum of the barges. "I will defend myself."

"Oh, I'm sure of that," Uldir said. "I saw what you did to law enforcement back in the cantina."

She lifted her chin, and he suddenly realized she was kind of pretty, with her dark eyes and short brown bangs. And young -- maybe younger than he. She certainly did not look like the glamorous ideal of a galasol game-girl -- more like someone's kid sister playing dress-up.

"What business is that of yours?" she demanded, looking him over. "That's not a CSA uniform."

"You owe me four drinks," he said. "Besides, I just have this odd feeling you're up to no good."

"You're wrong there," the girl replied. "You have no idea how wrong."

"Explain my error, then. I'll be happy to listen."

She smiled faintly. "You don't need an explanation," she said.

It occurred to Uldir that he really didn't. Now that he had met her, she seemed an honest sort. Whatever problem she had with the CSA was probably a misunderstanding. He shrugged and was starting to walk away when he got it.

"Hey!" he said, turning.

A lump of ore thudded into his shoulder with enough force to knock him down. He bounced back up, fast, but she was already there. Now that he knew what she was, he wasn't surprised.

Nor did he get a chance for more conversation. She was in midair, aiming a kick at his solar plexus.

Training took over. Flying kicks were good for taking opponents off of speeders, or maybe if they were paralyzed, but they stunk against someone standing with balance and a little presence of mind. He spun aside and chopped at the back of her neck as she hurled past -- except she didn't hurl past. Instead, she touched down and pivoted, turning the kick into a wheel that caught him on the same target he'd been aiming for on her. He rolled with it, tumbling roughly over the ore, coming up to find her already on top of him. In her haste she had gotten sloppy, however, and he blocked her next kick and drove stiffened fingers into her midriff. She wheezed and fell back roughly onto the ore.

"Listen -- " he began, but before he could get more out, she gestured with her left hand, and another chunk of rock leapt up from about a meter away and popped him in the forehead. He sat down, hard.

"Ow," he said, rubbing his head. "You didn't have to do that. I'm -- "

He noticed it before she did, maybe because she was stunned from his punch and maybe because she was concentrating on him. He dove toward her. She jerked her hands up defensively, but he caught them and hauled her to her feet just as several white-hot flashes melted pits through the ore she'd been lying on.

"Fliers!" he shouted.

Sure enough, five atmospheric security fliers were descending toward them, spraying blaster fire. Uldir suddenly found himself face-to-face with the girl, still holding both of her hands. She seemed to study him for about a nanosecond, then broke free and began running again. Uldir followed, blaster fire warming his heels.

The girl ran to the edge of the barge, followed it for a few seconds, and then leaped out into space.

"Wait!" Uldir shouted. Too late. He came skidding to a halt, peering over, hoping she'd dropped onto some tall building, but there was nothing but a sixty-meter plummet to the drab, one-story duraplast outskirts of the spaceport.

A bolt came near enough to curl his eyebrows, and he gathered that he had become a substitute target. Several more shots spanged around the barge's edge, and with a wordless curse he jerked back into motion, dropping back into the barge so he could use the raised lip as limited cover. His hand itched for his blaster, but that was still on his ship.

The pilots were smart. Four stayed back, laying down a sort of perimeter of fire that kept him boxed on the barge. The fifth zoomed in lower, focusing on hitting him. He tried to clear his mind, feel the shots coming before they did, but his Jedi training had been mostly wasted -- he had no natural talent for the Force. Still, now and then, his luck was unusual enough to suggest that Master Skywalker's academy had left him with *something*.

This time, he didn't think he would be as lucky as usual. When a sixth flier rose up from below the barge, scarcely two meters to his right, he was sure of it. He winced as blasters fired.

But the bolts seared over his head and struck the flier harassing him at close range, and his focus suddenly changed, centering on the yellow-and-black-clad figure at the controls of the newly arrived vessel. The figure was gesturing impatiently.

"You don't have to tell me twice," Uldir muttered. Still dodging the more distant fire, he ran toward the flier and jumped in. The instant he was on board, the girl punched the throttle, weaving through a net of white bolts.

"Thanks," Uldir said.

"If this is a trick, you'll regret it," the girl snapped. "Why were you chasing me?"

"I didn't know you were Jedi."

The girl banked crazily and dropped low toward the landscape.

"I think you really want altitude, here," he added.

"Yeah? You want to fly?"

"Um -- okay."

"Great." She let go of the controls, leaving Uldir to dive for them before the flier smacked into a transmission tower. Meanwhile, she went back to work on whatever was strapped to her leg.

"Didn't know I was Jedi? *That's* why everyone else is after me."

"I thought you were a thief," Uldir explained, nosing up in time to avoid a serious insult from coherent light and charged particles. "Why *are* they after you?"

"Because I'm Jedi. Are you stim-pickled? Don't you know every planet in the galaxy is scrambling to turn us over to the Yuuzhan Vong?"

"I'm aware of that," Uldir said, dryly. "I nearly got turned in myself."

She laughed. "You're no Jedi."

That stung more than Uldir cared to admit. "Hey, be nice to me. I saved your skinny . . . er, your skin."

"And I returned the favor," she reminded him. "We're even now. So. Why would anyone try to turn you in?"

Uldir flipped a lock of his chestnut hair away from his eyes. "I'm a rescue flier," he said. "An ex-partner of mine turned out to be Peace Brigade, and he found out I once attended the Jedi academy. He arranged an ambush I was lucky to get out of. That was right after the Yuuzhan Vong warmaster announced that if all the Jedi were turned over to him, he'd stop conquering the galaxy." He shook his head. "As if anyone could really believe that."

"You attended Master Skywalker's academy?" The girl asked, skeptically.

"Is there another?"

"No."

"I didn't have any aptitude for the Force, though," Uldir added.

"So much is obvious," the girl said.

"Yeah, I think you mentioned that," Uldir said, veering sharply to port, where the police fliers were trying to flank him and doing a pretty good job. "Hold on a second," he said. "We'll have to fight a little, here." He glanced over his shoulder. "My name is Uldir, by the way."

"Klin-Fa Gi, at your service," she said grimly. "You almost got me killed, Uldir. Don't do it again."

"I'll try not to, Klin-Fa Gi. Stay down. We're going to take some hits."

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

For the second time that night, she leaped past him, landing with feline grace on the prow of the speeder. She stood there, a perfect target for the two fliers they were barreling toward. Then a snap-hiss carried over the wind, and a sliver of yellow energy appeared in her left hand, cutting quickly into a figure eight and sending a pair of blaster bolts humming off into the wastelands.

So that's what was taped to her leg, Uldir concluded. Klin-Fa must have walked in front of one of the weapons sensors that Bonadan was lousy with.

"I guess I have shields now," Uldir murmured, thumbing the blaster fire controls on his stick and jinking starboard. His shot was dead on, frying the opposing flier's stabilizer. It went spinning off. Uldir hoped the pilot would get the flier under control before it hit the ground below.

That's one, he thought, as Klin-Fa executed another crazy series of parries that left their flier unscathed by enemy fire.

As he'd noticed before, the pilots weren't stupid. Contrary to the usual tactics of aerial combat, they were now trying to get underneath them, where the Jedi's lightsaber wasn't. He let the flier drop, hoping that Klin-Fa could keep her footing, afraid to do any really tight turns.

Shadowed wasteland came up at them, endless hectares of chemical-blistered ground cut into fractal patterns by violent erosion. Bonadan's primary was now a thin red lens on the horizon, and a little north of that lightning serpentine inside an anvil-shaped cloud. The wind tasted of water, grit, and unwholesome carbon compounds.

The storm gave him an idea, though, so he flattened his course toward the thunderhead. Rain would stymie eyesight, and lightning would confuse instruments. Maybe even the eye-in-the sky droids the patrol was undoubtedly tapping into. If he and Klin-Fa got through that, maybe he could circle back and find the *No Luck Required* before the security fliers picked up the trail. If the ship was repaired, then they might be able to get off-planet before the port authority shut them down. If . . .

He grinned tightly, remembering what Vega would say: *"If" is just a short way of saying, "we're doomed."*

"Are those guys Peace Brigade?" Uldir shouted to the girl.

"You mentioned them before," she shot back. "I never heard of them."

Uldir arched an eyebrow. That was surprising. "They're a collaborationist organization," he told her. "They figure we can't beat the Yuuzhan Vong, so they might as well join them, get in their good graces while it's still possible. Sometimes they infiltrate local law enforcement."

Klin-Fa snorted. "Nobody in the Corporate Authority ever needed prompting when there was any potential for profit, and the 'zecs don't deal with middle-men unless they have to. There's a Yuuzhan Vong executor on this planet even as we speak. I'm guessing the 'zecs cut their own deal."

"What? But that violates the neutrality pact."

"I'll bet it doesn't. CSA attorneys can find a loophole when there isn't even a loop."

The cloud loomed, but the fliers were getting too close. He dipped lower, dropping into one of the arroyos that crawled downhill toward the spaceport.

"I guess you can fly," Klin-Fa conceded reluctantly, leaping over the cockpit to land on their stern, now the most threatened portion of the ship.

"You don't say?" Uldir retorted. "Gosh, I'm glad you told me. I'd never have known. Now I'm all beaming and confident. I just know I can get us out of this."

She ignored the sarcasm. "Rescue flier, huh?" she mused. "Who do you rescue?"

"Jedi, mostly."

Klin-Fa blocked a bolt aimed for their rear stabilizer and shot him a strange look. "What?" She asked. "Who do you work for?"

"The paychit comes from the New Republic Search and Rescue Corps, but that's sort of a cover. The orders come from Master Skywalker, ultimately. He's been organizing a network to move Jedi out of danger for months."

"I wouldn't know about that," she said. "I've been . . . out of touch. I didn't even know about the warmaster's ultimatum until yesterday."

That explained why she didn't know about the Peace Brigade either. "Where were you that you didn't hear about that?" Uldir asked.

Her eyes narrowed. "You'll understand if I don't just volunteer that information."

"Hey, you're the Jedi. Can't you tell if I'm lying, or a threat?"

She hesitated. "I've been fooled before," she admitted. "Just understand this -- I'm on a mission, also for Master Skywalker. I've discovered something of utmost importance, a dire threat to the New Republic."

"But you won't tell me what it is?"

"No."

Uldir was impressed at how impassive she remained. Though his crazy course through the canyons had temporarily freed them of blaster fire, it couldn't be easy for her to keep her footing, yet she hadn't even blinked. She had liquid helium in her veins, this girl.

"We're about to plow straight into a storm," he said. "Maybe you ought to get back into the cockpit."

"Storm? No. Maybe you ought to -- *watch out!*"

Uldir jerked on the stick, mentally tasking himself for becoming distracted. One of the security fliers had somehow worked its way up a side canyon and was now quite suddenly in front of him. Blaster fire scorched along their underbelly, and the craft jerked like a harpooned toukfin. The power system whined, and all of the indicators on the board went dead. The flier dropped as Uldir frantically jiggled at the re-route to emergency systems.

The power failure lasted only an instant, but it was a gut-plunging one, and he was now on a collision course with the offending flier. He banked hard to port, momentarily forgetting he had a passenger balanced on his prow. Klin-Fa didn't seem to mind -- she deftly shifted to stand on the narrow part of the flier now presented to the sky, crouched, and cut downward at the other vehicle. Uldir saw a shear of sparks before the impact. It was a glancing blow, and their opponent went gyring away missing a good



chunk of its nose. Uldir was vaguely aware of the crunching sound it made as it plowed into a canyon wall, but most of his attention was focused on avoiding the same fate. The repulsors sputtered again, and with a silent curse he rose out of the arroyo, unable to trust his craft enough to maneuver there anymore.

It was then, facing the black wall of the storm, that he realized he didn't see Klin-Fa. His last maneuvers must have dislodged her.

He dug into a sharp turn -- hoping to spot her and hoping as well that her Jedi abilities had helped her survive the fall -- when a shout from below got his attention. He saw the young Jedi clinging to the craft's magnetic mooring lock by the fingers of one hand.

"Hang on!" Uldir locked the course for the storm and reached into the dash compartment, coming out with an enforcement special blaster. Then he climbed out of the cockpit and onto the nose of the craft, waving his arms for balance.

The three remaining fliers were catching up quickly, and the air was brittle with ionized death. Uldir dropped to his belly and reached over the brink, grasping Klin-Fa by the wrist. She locked her own fingers around his wrist in turn and dangled in space, whirling her lightsaber to deflect a blaster bolt that would have cut her in half. Uldir stood, hauling her up, watching in amazement as she continued to fend off attacks. With his free hand he grimly fired at the lead police craft, which was coming in way too fast. He grazed it twice, then hit the cockpit a glancing blow that must have hurt the pilot, because the craft peeled off suddenly. Then two concussions in a row rocked his flier so badly that Uldir nearly lost his footing. He swung the Jedi back onto the bow just as the first of the rain spattered around them.

"Back in the cockpit!" he shouted. The craft was beginning to list weirdly toward starboard, indicating a probably fatal malfunction in one of the stabilizers.

Another bolt hit them as they made it to the crash seats, and then, as if they had passed under a curtain, the rain was driving so hard Uldir couldn't see anything. He flipped on the weather shield, and the water began sheeting off against its field, but visibility didn't increase in the slightest.

An eighteen-headed dragon of lightning howled around them, and Uldir's neck hairs pricked to attention. The sound was like the implosion of a planet.

"Sithspit!" Klin-Fa shouted. "What have you done to us?"

"You don't see our friends anymore, do you?"

"No. They'd know better than to fly into a sweeper storm."

"A what?"

"Bonadan has weather control stations all over it. You don't think this is natural, do you? They generate these on the outskirts when the air gets too caustic for the miners. The rain and lightning precipitates some of the crud they put in the sky every day."

"Oh. Your point?"

"My point is, it's more concentrated and violent than a normal storm, jets-for-brains. The funnel around the eye is designed to create maximum ionization."

"Maximum -- uh-oh."

It had been getting darker, but in the not-to-distance he saw sheets of lighting dancing like nebula veils.

"So we don't want to go there, huh?" Uldir grunted, frantically pulling the stick starboard. Nothing happened. The ship was carrying them nowhere but the heart of the storm.

"No. So get us out of here already," Klin-Fa shouted. Even through the windscreen, the sound of the storm was almost deafening.

"I can't. I locked the controls when I went out to get you. They're still locked."

"Well, unlock them, vac-brain!"

Uldir continued flipping switches. "Not happening," he said.

"Well, what, then?"

"Hang on, I guess."

He pointed the blaster at the rear repulsor assembly and fired.

"Are you insane?" Klin-Fa shrieked.

"I wasn't before I met you," Uldir replied. "Now I'd need a professional opinion." He fired again, and the flier seemed to sag against the wind. The bow dropped nearly perpendicular to the ground.

"Like I said," Uldir remarked, as another net of lightning crackled completely around them, "hang on."

He felt a tingle then that did not come from the lightning, and he recognized it as a movement in the Force. He might not be sensitive enough to actually wield it, but he had been around the most powerful Jedi in the galaxy, and had learned to recognize its use.

Especially now, when it felt somehow *wrong*. He looked at Klin-Fa and found her eyes shut and her face utterly composed. For some reason that was momentarily terrifying. Then he didn't have any more time to think about it, because they hit the ground, skipped, tumbled, and hit again. The screen went down, and rain was suddenly smothering them. After that, darkness.

* * *

Uldir woke spitting water from his mouth and feeling the painful itch of it in his lungs. One of the flier's running lights shone murkily from beneath the surface. Other than that, the darkness was broken only by the terrible white and red flares of lightning that grew more extreme with each second. The rain was mixed with hail now, which struck painfully against the bare skin of his face, and the thunder was an almost uninterrupted roar. The torrents unleashed from the sky were continuing to sculpt the arroyo he'd crashed in as it had been doing since the natural vegetation of Bonadan had given up its tenuous hold on existence. The flier was fetched up against something and filling quickly with water.

In the dull light, he made out Klin-Fa Gi, slumped unconscious, her face just out of the water. He felt for her pulse and, to his relief, found it strong. When he failed to wake her, he got her in a swim carry, holding her from behind so her head would remain above the surface. Even as he did this, the level and speed of the flood rose, and swiftly. He had to get to higher ground; that much was obvious. Not too high, though -- lightning had a lofty aim, and Uldir already felt like he was on a target range for a tactical air-to-planet assault force.

The current took him, and it was far too strong to fight. He pointed his feet downstream, using his boots to protect him from rocks and other obstacles. This was awkward, as it put Klin-Fa on top of him, and his head went under with regularity. He'd been trained for this sort of situation, however, as part of his preparation for rescue flying, and the little voice of panic that threatened to become a shout kept relatively quiet. All he had to do was keep his head, he told himself. And his arms, and his legs . . .

When he started to feel the shock of the lightning, that became more difficult to do. Nightmare images of stone and turbid water strobed every few seconds, so he had almost a continuous view of his surroundings now. Kicking from a protruding rock, he aimed himself at what looked like a slope that might take him above flood capacity. He nearly missed it, but he managed to get a clawhold on a rock and -- pulling against the immensely strong current -- drag himself and the Jedi onto the incline. He lay panting there for a moment until a bolt struck so close that he felt the hot spray of spalled stone on his cheek. With a grunt, he got Klin-Fa on his shoulder and made for what looked like a sort of overhang.

His luck held; it was indeed a small cave in the side of the canyon. It went in deep enough to be dry. He hoped it was also deep enough not to conduct a lightning strike, and high enough that the flood wouldn't fill it, because he didn't have a joule of strength left. He lay in the darkness, trying not to flinch at the barrage outside, promising himself that the next time a girl upset his drink he'd just buy another one.

Outside, it seemed the planet was burning, the thunder become like the sound of a fusion drive blowing in atmosphere. He closed his eyes against the glare and waited for it to pass.

It did, finally, and an eerie calm settled as the eye went over. Then Uldir was treated to another fireworks display, courtesy of Bonadan weather control.

When the lightning finally receded, he began to realize he was cold. Was it winter here? Did Bonadan have a winter? He couldn't remember. Maybe when the renewed search found them, they would find a couple of frozen corpses.

By the light of a glowstick he had in one of his many pockets, he examined Klin-Fa with the small medpack he always carried. A nasty swelling on her head indicated the cause of her continued unconsciousness, but otherwise she seemed sound -- he couldn't find any evidence of broken bones or internal bleeding.

He gave her a broad-spectrum anti-inflammatory and antibiotic, made her as comfortable as he could, then turned to his remaining resources.

That consisted more-or-less of his comlink. He handled the small cylinder thoughtfully for a moment, considering. It had been modified with a trace-scrambler -- though any searchers in the area would know he was transmitting, it would take a security decryption to allow

them to triangulate. The CSA probably had pretty decent technology in that area, but he could probably transmit for thirty seconds or so before they had enough data to either unscramble the message or pinpoint his position.

It was getting colder. It was worth the risk. He keyed it on.

Static roared, probably due to the nearby storm. Still, after a second, he made out a distorted version of Vega Sepen's voice.

"Hey, boss-boy," she said. "You really should follow my advice now and then."

"Listen, Vega," Uldir said. "The girl was a Jedi, turns out. We've eluded pursuit for the time being, but we're down in the outback, maybe fifteen clicks southeast of town."

"Those aren't very good directions."

"Just look for wherever the police fliers are shooting," he said.

"With what? The ship's still in dock."

"I trust you, Vega. You'll think of something. Gotta go, before they trace this."

"Okay. Good luck, boss-boy."

"I hate it when you call me that."

"I know." The signal crackled out, and Uldir keyed off the comlink. He was probably still safe, but the next time he used it they would find his location in seconds.

Klin-Fa stirred and moaned. He touched her forehead and found it cold. He'd actually started shivering himself, from the wet and the falling temperature. With a sigh, he drew off his jacket. He lay next to the young Jedi, spooning against her, and covered them both with the jacket. It took a long time before the contact began to feel warm.

* * *

He woke with dark eyes centimeters from his own.

"Did you enjoy that?" Klin-Fa asked.

"Huh?"

"Snuggling up against me? Is that your idea of a good time?"

"Hey, I was just trying to keep us warm. Keep you warm."

She *almost* smiled. "Relax, jets-for-brains," she said. "I know what you were doing, and thanks. Just don't get any ideas."

Uldir realized their bodies were still touching, and he felt suddenly and completely uncomfortable. "What? No, of course not."

She tapped his forehead with her finger. "Right. I didn't think there was that much danger of an idea popping out of there, but you never know."

"Hey, I was doing more thinking than you were last night."

"I *bet* you were."

"That's not what I meant." His face felt tingly.

She sat up. Harsh yellow-white light glared through the entrance to the cave. "Where are we?"

"Somewhere in the badlands south of town. Our flier went down, you may remember."

"I remember you flying into a sweeper storm."

"Hey, how was I to know? For that matter, how did you know?"

"I'm *from* here," she growled.

"Bonadan?"

"No, this cave. Yes, Bonadan. I grew up on this miserable hole."

"Hey, everyone has to grow up somewhere."

"Yes, but they don't have to go back. I did, worse the luck."

"Why?"

"You and your questions. Are you a pilot or a reporter?"

"A pilot," Uldir said.

"And where's your ship?"

"I -- ah, I don't know."

"Not much of a pilot then, are you? Looks like its up to me to get us out of here."

"Well, it is your planet."

"Don't remind me." She started toward the entrance, then froze.

"What?"

"Come here," she whispered. "Be quiet."

He went with her to peek through the cave entrance. Beyond was the gully that they'd both nearly drowned in the night before. It was dry now, silted with fresh alluvium, and they could see about half a klick down it. Near the bend, up toward where the flier had gone down, he could see eight figures on foot, moving down the arroyo in their direction.

"Search party," he said.

"Yes," she replied. "See that one third from the left?"

"I'm not blind."

"I am, where he's concerned," Klin-Fa replied. "I can't feel him in the Force. That can only mean one thing."

Uldir nodded. "Yuuzhan Vong," he said. "Things just got a whole lot worse."

As if to underscore the remark, he heard the whine of fliers overhead, several of them.

To Be Continued...